Goodbye CRP?

SAVANNAH SPARROW BY KEN ARCHER

Congressional cutbacks and high commodity prices are compelling landowners to convert Conservation Reserve Program grasslands—which benefit pheasants, ducks, and other prairie wildlife—back to crops. BY DAVE SMITH

Montana farmers and farmland wildlife have seen plenty of changes during the past five decades. In the 1960s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) phased out its Soil Bank Program, which controlled commodity surpluses by paying landowners to convert croplands to grasses and other cover. The program helped boost pheasant and other grassland wildlife populations throughout the Great Plains. During the next decade, encouraged by rising grain prices and a federal government eager to increase worldwide agricultural exports, farmers in Montana and other states plowed up millions of acres of marginally productive land and planted wheat, corn, soybeans, and other commodity crops. When grain prices tumbled in the early 1980s, farms began failing at a rate not seen since the Depression. What's more, the intensive cropping drastically increased soil erosion and chewed up grasslands that supported upland birds, waterfowl, songbirds, deer, and other wildlife. By 1985 mallard, pintail, and blue-winged teal populations were at or near their lowest levels in 30 years.

All that began to change when President Ronald Reagan signed the Food Security Act of 1985, enacting the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The program pays landowners to take highly erodible croplands out of production and plant them to grasses. In addition to reducing price-depressing commodity surpluses, CRP grasslands anchor soil to the landscape, reducing erosion and making streams and lakes cleaner. Another benefit has been the restoration of wildlife habitat at a scale unmatched by any state, federal, or private wildlife conservation program. In Montana alone, more than 3 million acres of grasslands, wetlands, and other habitats are currently conserved under CRP contracts on 6,247 farms. The state contains nearly 10 percent of the 31.2 million acres now enrolled nationally.

CRP's benefits to wildlife have become legendary. Dave Nomsen, vice president of governmental affairs for Pheasants Forever, calls CRP "the most successful conservation program in history," not only for roosters but also waterfowl, deer, and other game animals. Brian Martin, director of science for The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Montana, adds that the federal farm program "provides key linkages between large blocks of native prairie" essential for populations of nongame grassland birds such as Baird's sparrows and bobolinks. Valley County farmer Don Fast, who has enrolled marginal cropland into CRP for years, has witnessed enormous increases in pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and other wildlife on his property. He has also seen far less erosion throughout the county. "We forget how many dust storms we had in the 1980s, and the importance of CRP in preventing wind erosion on the lighter soils," he says.

Despite its benefits to farmers and wildlife, CRP may be in trouble. Congress, faced with growing federal deficits, reduced the amount of acreage that could be enrolled in CRP by nearly 20 percent in 2008. Some congressional leaders claim the program—which costs $1.7 billion per year in payments to landowners—is too expensive. Federal officials have refused to increase rental payments to keep pace with rising prices for wheat and other commodities. As a result, plowing up CRP grasslands and planting them to crops has become more attractive to farmers. The amount of CRP in Montana has declined by 11 percent since a peak in 2006, and conservation leaders fear far greater declines in the next few years.

FLUSH WITH PHEASANTS

Farmers enroll property in CRP by entering into 10- or 15-year contracts with the USDA's Farm Service Agency. Landowners agree to stop raising crops there and plant grasses (native or non-native), shrubs, or trees. They are reimbursed from 50 to 90 percent of the cost of the plantings along with annual payments that average, in Montana, $32.40 per acre.

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Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and TNC have successfully lobbied Congress to make the program do more to protect critical habitats such as prairie pothole wetlands and duck nesting grasslands. Pheasant populations in particular have boomed under the federal program. The upland birds thrive in young stands of grass and forbs planted on CRP lands. A study by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources showed that pheasant numbers increased by nearly one-third after croplands in that state were converted to CRP grasses. Rick Northrup, statewide game bird coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, says the state's pheasant harvest has climbed from an annual average of 84,000 birds before 1985 to an average of

FIELD OF PLENTY A hunter takes aim at Hungarian partridges flushing from a CRP field edge. The federal farm program benefits a wide range of grassland bird species.

CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

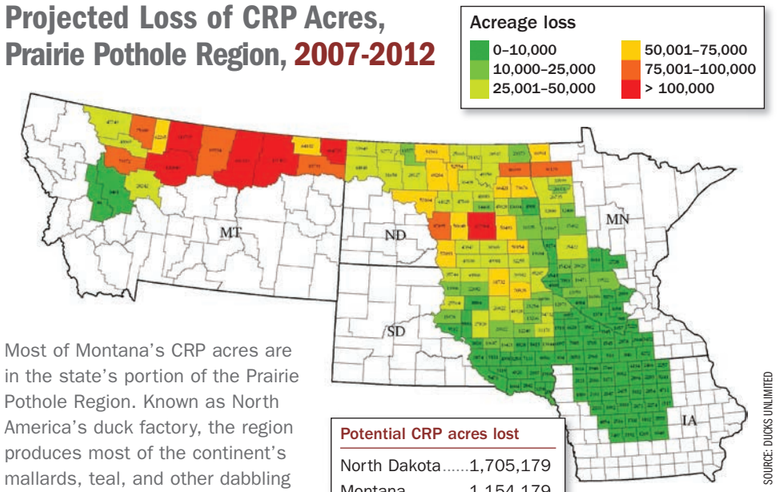
124,000 annually from 1986 to 2009. "The relationship between CRP and our pheasant harvest is pretty clear," he says.

It's clear for ducks, too. Biologists with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) concluded that CRP lands contribute an additional 2.2 million ducks to the continental fall flight each year. Increased CRP acreage produces more grasslands where ducks nest (usually near wetlands) and makes it harder for predators such as foxes and skunks to find eggs and ducklings.

Nongame prairie bird populations would suffer without CRP, say biologists. Researchers at the University of Montana and USFWS determined that converting CRP acres to cropland in the Dakotas would cause some grassland bird populations to decline by half, and the combined populations of five species would drop by 1.8 million birds. Even with existing CRP acres, "grassland birds are declining faster than any other bird species," says Steve Hoffman, executive director of Montana Audubon. "CRP is absolutely vital to maintaining the quantity of grassland habitat needed by species like the grasshopper sparrow that require big blocks of grass."

And then there are the environmental benefits. According to research by the Food and Agricultural Policy Institute at the University of Missouri, CRP reduces soil erosion on a single acre by 12.1 tons each year and prevents the annual loss of 25.6 pounds of phosphorous and 6.4 pounds of nitrogen per acre compared to an acre of cropland. The USDA has determined that CRP reduces soil erosion by 450 million tons per year nationwide. "The experiment is over," says Pat Gunderson, FWP regional supervisor in Glasgow. "It's clear what will happen if CRP goes away."

Projected Loss of CRP Acres, Prairie Pothole Region, 2007-2012



Most of Montana's CRP acres are in the state's portion of the Prairie Pothole Region. Known as North America's duck factory, the region produces most of the continent's mallards, teal, and other dabbling ducks. Montana, the number three duck-producing state in the United States, is projected to lose the second most acres of CRP.

Potential CRP acres lost	
North Dakota	1,705,179
Montana	1,154,179
South Dakota	764,169
Minnesota	601,884
Iowa	106,000

SOURCE: DUCKS UNLIMITED

WORTH THE HIGH PRICE TAG?

Let it go away, say some critics, or improve it, say others. People in some rural communities believe the program takes too much farmland out of production, thus hindering economic growth. They argue that fewer crops mean fewer equipment dealers, seed and fertilizer sales, and other forms of agribusiness. And while applauding the program's wildlife benefits, many hunters complain it doesn't guarantee public access to CRP lands. Other critics maintain that the $36 billion spent on the program over the past quarter-century could have bought millions of acres of unproductive farmland outright and permanently restored it to native grasses. If CRP vanishes, they say, taxpayers will be left with nothing of lasting value.

But CRP proponents argue that outright farmland acquisitions by the federal government are politically unpopular in many states. Nomsen notes that short-term land retirement opportunities like those CRP now provides are essential for retaining support for the program from farmers and farm state lawmakers. "A successful landscape-scale program must include a suite of options, and ten-year contracts are part of that reality," says Nomsen. "At the same time, we do believe that opportunities exist to move some CRP acres into other programs that provide long-term wildlife and water quality benefits."

Supporters of CRP point out that annual payments to Montana landowners total $100 million each year. What's more, the federal program generates tourism income for many rural areas. "CRP is extremely important to our community," says Mike Jensen, a Sheridan County farmer and owner of Cousins Restaurant in Plentywood. "We have some of the best upland game bird hunting anywhere, and CRP is a huge part of the reason people come up here." Based on an FWP economic analysis of upland hunting, Jensen estimates that bird hunters spend $2 million in lodging, food, equipment, and other related costs each year in Sheridan County, which contains nearly 150,000 acres enrolled in the federal program. "CRP means a lot to main street businesses," he says.

Still, the program's future is by no means secure. Montana has lost nearly 400,000 acres of CRP in the last four years and contracts for another 1.5 million acres are scheduled to expire by fall 2012—a significant loss that worries conservation leaders. "Since Ducks Unlimited started in Montana in 1984, we've conserved 82,000 acres of habitat through a lot of hard work," says Robert Sanders, the group's regional biologist for Montana. "We'd have to be here for a century to conserve what could be lost through CRP expirations in 2012."

This past August, the USDA allowed landowners their first opportunity since 2006 to renew expired CRP contracts or enroll new acres in what is known as a "general signup." Further, the federal agriculture agency recently added 150,000 acres nationwide to CRP's State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative, which focuses on protecting critical wildlife habitats on private land. Montana's three SAFE projects totaling 18,700 acres conserve pheasant winter cover, prairie potholes, and sagebrush habitats, says Northrup.

Nomsen and other conservation leaders who closely follow federal farm policy say the August general signup will help offset some recent CRP acreage losses. And demand by conservationists and landowners to maintain the program remains strong. But with growing nationwide unease over federal spending, congressional leaders and other policymakers may be dubious about CRP's public costs when weighed against public benefits.

Mark Sullivan, FWP wildlife manager in Glasgow, says local hunters, bird watchers, and other conservationists understand how political winds can reroute federal farm policy. While trying to remain hopeful, they can't help but feel uneasy over CRP's future. "People around here know that if you take it off the landscape, you are taking away a lot of wildlife and a lot of hunting opportunity," Sullivan says.

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PHOTOS BY LARRY KRICKENBERG

HATCHING MULTIPLE BENEFITS CRP acres provide essential nesting grasses for waterfowl. They also create grasslands important for deer, pheasants, and prairie birds such as curlews and bobolinks, says Pat Gunderson, FWP regional supervisor in Glasgow, shown checking a CRP field enrolled in Montana's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. Land rich in CRP acreage attracts upland bird hunters and their pocketbooks. Mike Jensen, a farmer and the owner of Cousins Family Restaurant in Plentywood, estimates that bird hunters each year spend roughly $2 million in Sheridan County on food, lodging, gas, and equipment.

Sharing the cost of CRP plantings

NELSON KENFER

Montana bird hunters are helping make CRP even more attractive to landowners—and CRP plantings more beneficial to wildlife. FWP's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP), funded with upland game bird hunting license dollars, pays landowners some of the costs to seed CRP acres to bird nesting cover and maintain the plantings. Since it began in 1989, the habitat program has helped pay for grass seed on more than 100,000 acres of CRP land in Montana. "That's been a big help to landowners and also to upland bird hunters and other folks who appreciate healthy grassland bird populations," says Debbie Hohler, UGBEP biologist for FWP. Hohler adds that landowner interest in the program has grown following the recent general signup allowing new CRP enrollments.

Learn more about the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program cost-share opportunity at any FWP area or regional office, or on-line at fwp.mt.gov (look under "Habitat" then "Wildlife Habitat" then "Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program").